DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 211 CG 012 081

AUTHOR Bardwick, Judith M.
TITLE Some Aspects of Women's Relationships with Women.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (San Francisco, California, August 26-30, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Childhood Friendship; *Females; Feminism; *Friendship; Interaction; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Peer Relationship; Sex Differences; Social Attitudes; State of the Art Reviews

ABSTRACT

Feminist awareness of sexism is leading to a re-evaluation of the importance of women's relationships with each other and to a new awareness that in those relationships there is an enormous potential for mutual support. But women's relationships with women have not only been based on the unconscious assumption of a shared second rate status, they have also characteristically fused intimacy and mistrust. Women have tended to neither respect nor trust other women. The author sees this mistrust as originating in childhood, where girls' and boys' friendship patterns differ greatly. Boys are substitutable for each other. They form a group or pool of friends, and if one is rejected it is usually for his inability to bat, run, or perform well in a particular game. Girls, however, form dyads which reject other girls totally. This sometimes crushing personal rejection helps shape women's ways of relating in adult life. (Author/BP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED149211

Some Aspects of Women's Relationships With Women

Judith M. Bardwick

APA Symposium
San Francisco, August, 1977

It is, in itself, an expression of sexism, to the assumed greater significance of women's relationships with men, that the vast majority of the literature about the feminist movement has been concerned with changes in women's relationships with men and the equally important shifts in women's relationships with each other, has received so much less attention. This lack of interest is not only because relationships with men are supposed to be crucial but is also because when the adult role of the daughter is to become a mother and the task of the mother is to teach the daughter to become a mother, and the mother and daughter and wife roles are basically the same for all women and thus gender is caste, then, in an achieving, individualistic culture, women are judged as uninteresting. Of course that is all changing.

Feminist awareness of sexism is leading to a re-evaluation of the importance of women's relationships with each other and to a new awareness that in those relationships there is an enormous potential for mutual support. But women's relationships with women have not only been based on the unconscious assumption of a shared second rate status, they have also characteristically fused intimacy and mistrust. Women have tended to neither respect nor trust other women.

Love rejection and Distrust

It is difficult to pinpoint the beginnings of this sense of mistrust and many people write about girls' competition with each other for boys. But that becomes important in adolescence and I think the origins of the misgivings are much earlier.

A kindergarten teacher sent me the following story which had been spontaneously dictated to her by Anne, age 6:

CG012081

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Judith M Bardwick

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

"There's two girls who like each other and are best friends. There's a little girl who wants to play with them and they don't want to play with her. She's very sad. The other girls are laughing at her."

I have not seen any data so I am not certain of how widespread the pattern is, but I find that the great majority of women remember a pattern which begins long before adolescence. They have a best friend and after a while this dyad adds another girl and becomes a triad. Then one girl is rejected and again there is a dyad of two best friends but now there is also one who was repudiated. I remember this from my own girlhood, saw it repeated when my daughters were growing up and have had students tell me that they have seen it in many other countries. This pattern, of compelling intimacy and the mutual deliciousness of being "best friends," along with the potential for feeling devasted because you are rejected because someone else is chosen, is very different from the typical play patterns of boys. Of course boys also sometimes play with just one other boy and they can have a "best friend," but one rarely has the feeling that the relationship is as passionate and therefore as crucial to each boy as is usual for girls. To a much greater extent the boys are substitutable for each other as boys form a group, a pool of friends.

By the time he enters school the typical boy prefers to play with other boys, often in an active way, frequently in something like a team, usually in a ritualized way in which leadership is overt. This has several effects: dominance relations, who leads and who follows is public, these power relationships are between boys, changes in dominance or leadership are done according to rules of that group, and while aggression or assertion are overt the forms are ritualized and for the boys who are accepted members of the group, these are not intensely personal issues.

Not only are overt aggression or dominance not sanctioned for girls but wanting to secure a relationship of an exclusive, intimate, best friend while knowing that you may not be selected or you might end up best enemies, makes girls act in the ways

that are safest, in the ways that make you popular. As a result, aggression is often covert, and if overt, takes the form of gossip, of criticism of girls outside of her clique, her triad, her dyad. In addition to gossip, girls ignore or reject others. Before adolescence, when the sexes usually play separately, the recipient of this hostility is most likely another girl. The most exquisite aggression is to reject someone; the most piercing pain is to be the one rejected.

Unlike boys who may not be chosen for the baseball team because they can't hit, but who could be chosen third for something else because they can run... girls are being rejected for themselves, for their total self. Girls' covert agression leads, ultimately, to rejection; the boys' more overt and ritualized style tends not to create the intensity of acceptance or rejection that girls know.

A student wrote an anonymous paper in which she recalled what it was like:

"I remember having friends one day and being ostracized the next." "The boys, on the other hand, never seemed to have this problem. I mean, if he was not liked he was consistently ignored. There was no adjustment to make from one week to the other and he just kept out of the way. If it did happen that one of the boys had 'a bad day', they'd fight it out but twenty minutes later, they'd be best buddies again. But the girls...even among the best of them, we all went through a time period when we were the victims of group animosity enjoyed only by the other girls."

"I suppose one developed the art to forseeing a bad day, out of self preservation. Certain clues seemed evident by the end of the first class such as: 1) two girls would stare at you and then giggle to each other; 2) you see a note passed around and you're the only one who doesn't read it; 3) the girl who sat next to you at study hall for the last three days, sits with another girl who you know despises you; and 4) you are one of the last picked for a team in gym."

'To a twelve year old one message seemed fairly clear; you don't trust other girls. Last week's confidante is next week's gossip and you had better be judicious

in what you say and to whom you are saying it. In the end, you were safe with no one."

While girls' aggression can be more subtle than that of boys, it can also be more potent. If patterns of alternating intimacy and repudiation is characteristic of relationships between girls, then girls will learn that they can be seriously hurt by other girls and anticipating rejection, they will be acutely sensitive to innuendo as they constantly scan for anything negative. Many girls will learn that they are awfully vulnerable to incursions from other girls, that they may be ostracized and the person who rejects them can have been their closest friend. It is not necessary that every girl have had this experience. If it is a common experience it will be a real possibility in most girls' minds. We talk a great deal about mistrust between the sexes. I am suggesting that many girls will have experienced or anticipate a pattern of being chosen as the special friend, followed by rejection and this establishes a core sense of mistrust which has a powerful impact on women's relationships with each other.

Power Relationships Between Women

What would we expect relationships to be like between people who are afraid of the manipulations of the other, or are afraid to be obviously assertive because they're fearful of rejection and they need to be liked, or when one feels vulnerable and the other does not?

Psychologists usually describe these kinds of interactions in terms of people's needs for affiliation, their need to be liked. It might be more accurate to think, instead, in terms of power--either getting power, wielding it, protecting yourself from it or manipulating those who seem to have it. We do not think of women in terms of power, few women are in positions of significant power, and women themselves rarely think of themselves in terms of power. People do not associate women with power, few women have any, and many women feel powerless. Subject to the manipulations of those

with power, those without it respond in any way they can to prevent others' intrusions into their life which is the fundamental coercion of power.

Women who have never had the sense that they are heard, who have never learned that they can be potent, will be afraid of how they can be manipulated by those with power, will be afraid because stronger people can move into their psychological lifespace and the psychological dynamics are reaffirmed by what happens in reality.

I think that those who are without power are preoccupied with it because they are always afraid of being a victim. They have learned that others do make decisions which decide what happens to them, do intrude, do make them feel competent or incompetent, potent or a non-person. So it is appropriate, even adaptive, that weaker people are hypersensitive to the exertion of control by others and always searching for subtle cues of coercion. On the other hand, I think that those with power may be relatively oblivious or insensitive to dominance or power issues because they are not vulnerable. Women with power may be especially insensitive to the fact that they have control over others because powerful women are very discrepant from our image of what is feminine.

I would expect that vulnerable men and women, people who are experienced as victims, would feel very much the same way, revering and fearing the powerful, but the rules of appropriate ways of behaving are different for the sexes which leads them to act rather differently. More than men, women have learned that it is better to disguise their anger and they are skilled in rejecting people. Experienced in rejecting but afraid because they are also experienced in being rejected, they are likely to disguise their anger and express their sense of hurt. Seeking solace is acceptable for women and may, in fact, elicit support whereas anger expressed risks anger returned. Afraid of the others' power and of rejection, and needing protection, weak women are likely to ingratiate themselves and ask for help by subtly asking to be liked, to be liked the best of all. How ambivalent and paradoxical this is as the

weaker seeks to bolster herself by expressing her dependence.

To the extent that women are uncomfortable thinking of themselves as being powerful or having power and insofar as they become uncomfortable when others appear to say, "Protect me because I can be hurt. Indeed, you are hurting me," then we can expect strong women to be conflicted about their power. The dominant woman is likely to feel ambivalent, pleased that she is not vulnerable and can help but anxious because she can injure and perhaps guilty because it is hard to know when you have helped enough, and resentful of the responsibility for someone else's welfare, she may try to maintain distance and keep the relationship impersonal. The situation is conflicted for both. Especially if she is sensitive to what it felt like to be rejected and emotionally coerced, the more powerful woman is likely to deny her resentment of the dependence of the other, respond with support and withold negative judgments. This is more likely if the weaker woman expresses her pain in ways which are inescapably feminine because that is more likely to trigger nurturant responses. In this way the weaker has inhibited the stronger. While vulnerability and need are acknowledged and responded to, the basically aggressive manipulation is not. When this is truly successful, we can see the tyranny of the weak. This is a logical style of managing when people are experienced victims, when they are too familiar with their own powerlessness and although they are always afraid of being rejected they have learned to seek affirmation of themselves through benign responses from others. There must necessarily be so many hidden agendas in these interactions that mistrust between the participants is very likely.

As women operate on emotional and personal levels, because they are needy and vulnerable and because it is an acceptable style for women, then enotional needs are more likely to surface in relationships between women in comparison with those between men. In a relationship between a mentor and a protégé, for example, the tensions and the tasks that men have are the same of those of women. But emotional needs and

anxieties are not likely to be expressed since the model of masculinity specifically excludes expressing vulnerability and dependence.

Women in the same situation are more likely to be operating on both a task-related, objective level and a personalized, intimate one because they have learned to increase their self-esteem through the security of knowing they are liked. I think the female mentor is, to both, simultaneously the objective teacher, the intimate friend and the ambivalent mother. The closer the relationship, the more true this will be. As men must outgrow their mentor, the younger woman must relate to and then separate from the authority figure. The difference, when the relationship is between women, lies in the protégé's need to identify with the already successful woman and create the intimacy, the "best friend" relationship that she has learned will sustain her through stress. It is very difficult to create autonomy through intimacy, that is, through dependence. In addition, in a sexist society a mentor-mother is at best an exception to the rule of status and the protégé-daughter both disdains and needs the femaleness of the model.

While I am discussing psychological dynamics we are also talking about real power and status. While the majority of women do not have real power, increasingly, some women are in positions where they can create or grasp power and whether in a feminist organization, at work, in school or in government, that power is most likely to be over other women. Feminists are correct in believing that unless women have a commitment to sharing power with other women, an elite group will develop which will dominate and perpetuate the powerless position of the majority of women.

Divisiveness within the women's movement is enhanced when historically powerless people mistrust each other and especially those with power, real power has become possible, and individual competitiveness can gain large rewards.

Especially now when real mobility is possible, women will learn that if they compete successfully as individuals they can gain the money, power, status and

opportunity that men have monopolized. At least in the short run it is logical that women will now compete with each other as well as with men. There is a real danger if individualism prevails because only when women cooperate with each other will they be able to force change so that there will be that quantum number of women in many kinds of leadership positions and those who are there will not feel isolated and deviant. As difficult as it really is, because an individualistic, competitive and sexist culture does not lead to trust and cooperation between women, women must cooperate in a solidarity because unless they do, each individual will not be sustained and the movement itself will die.

The women's movement has begun to create the conditions such that women's relationships with each other are judged as important. This change, of a re-evaluation of women and of the importance of their commitments to each other is as profound as the re-evaluation of what the relationship between women and men should be. When women are able to work together and relate to each other as individuals whom they trust and like and respect, and when that is an ordinary experience, women will have broken through their own sexist preferences and memories of old betrayals and we will have achieved a major step in the direction of the great revolution. Of course women have always been friends but those relationships could not serve as existential anchors while they were judged as less important than relationships with men. As that is changing it means that now, when many traditional relationships - that is committments which are existential anchorages are threatened, a vast new spectrum of anchorages has become possible. So, today, I do feel some sense of optimism.